

“A Sun that Leaves No Shadows”: Camus’s Philosophy in Fiction

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The Stranger—Novel 1942

- Nonstandard elements:
 - Tonal shifts between descriptive and poetic narration
 - Poetic passages are always accompanied by natural forces
 - Dialogue is indirect or strangely punctuated
 - Meursault is neither hero nor anti-hero
 - No other characters fill any protagonist-roles
 - He is wholly passive for most of the novel, especially in his crime

These twists away from conventional novels show in Camus’s Absurd a mistrust of conventional narrative form; truth is found not in comfort but in confrontation.

The Myth of Sisyphus— Philosophical Monograph 1942

- Meandering style, non-traditional formulation
 - “this does not satisfy me” rather than “this does not satisfy reason”
 - Frequent use of natural metaphor and sensory impressions
- Presents positive archetypes of “the Absurd Man” in response to the Absurd
 - Don Juan, Actor, Conqueror, Artist

Camus’s organic style shows a trend toward personal fulfillment rather than reliance on either reason or metaphysical “hope” for continuation.

Caligula—Play published 1944; performed 1945

- Nonstandard elements:
 - Explicit, often pedantic monologues/conversations
 - Generally found in philosophy, not plays
 - Characters are mouthpieces rather than characters
 - No clear protagonist
 - Caligula is no hero, but not an anti-hero either—he acts according to higher ideals, not for himself
 - He acts according to an objective “logic”
 - Scipio, Cherea, and Helicon all react to the Absurd differently, but not in a way to show heroism
 - Unusual act structure and visuals
 - Long time skip between acts
 - Recurrence of mirrors, which function strangely on stage

The one-dimensional characters in the play, in addition to the images of mirrors, show in Camus’s Absurd a mistrust of unqualified absolutes.

Introduction/ Methodology:

Camus’s monograph *The Myth of Sisyphus*, novel *The Stranger*, and play *Caligula* were written and published in the same period of his life, between 1942 and 1945. Though they were published separately, Camus created these works to serve as companions to one another; he referred to them collectively as “the Absurds.” Drawing from this declared relation, I analyze each work as a manifestation of a central philosophy. I identify the ideas that each instantiation of the Absurds presents most clearly, especially within the context of the instantiation’s formal qualities; I perform this investigation first individually—without the context of the other works—then jointly, finally culminating in a conjoined analysis of how all three works function in tandem.

Context:

The Stranger: a French Algerian man, Meursault, attends his mother’s funeral, begins an affair with an attractive young woman, and kills an Arab man on the beach “because of the sun.” He is put on trial and sentenced to death.

Caligula: a Roman emperor is driven mad by the death of his sister and realizes that “men die, and they are not happy.” Caligula seeks to expose Rome to this reality by twisting “logic” into a murderous weapon; some years into his reign, his actions inspire rebellion, and he allows himself to be killed.

The Myth of Sisyphus: Camus investigates the Absurd, a phenomenon arising from the relation between humanity’s search for meaning in the world and the reality of a world lacking such meaning. Camus claims that “the only serious philosophical question is suicide.” The monograph investigates possible responses to the Absurd (suicide is rejected as a valid response) and advocates maintaining a constant awareness of it rather than attempting to retreat into familiarity.

Sisyphus on novels:

- “Only in novels does one change or become better.”
 - Meursault develops away from passivity in his defense before the jury, which culminates in the impassioned speech to the priest.
- “The thesis-novel, the work that proves, the most hateful of all, is the one that most often is inspired by a *smug* thought.”
 - Stranger* investigates, but there is no thesis statement, only a research question.
- “But [the Absurd man] prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live *without appeal* and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits.”
 - This “without appeal” appears in *Sisyphus* and *Stranger* with emphasis; Meursault refuses to appeal his sentence.

Meursault’s sudden development from passive to active in the face of the Absurd shows Camus’s thesis of active lucidity but lacks explicit discussion that would create a “thesis-novel.”

In Tandem:

- Direct illumination of the central thesis in these works is found in Camus’s 1955 Preface to *the Stranger*: Meursault is...a poor and naked man enamored of a sun that leaves no shadows” and “animated by a passion...for the absolute and for truth.”
 - Meursault, lucid, asserts that “I had been right, I still was still right, I was always right...It was as if I had waited all this time for this moment and for the first light of this dawn to be vindicated.” He retains a sense of valuation in the face of his coming death.
 - Caligula, lucid, cries that “My freedom isn’t the right one...The air tonight is heavy as the sum of human sorrows.” He sees an error in his lucidity—he has caused suffering in the service of misguided ideals.
 - Sisyphus, lucid, falters “when the images of earth cling too tightly to memory...But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged.” The absurdity of his condition, when directly considered, renders the gods’ punishment futile.

Camus claims in *Sisyphus* that “there is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night.” Truth, for these works, may be found in falsehood, but Nature is the only source we may cite to seek it.

Sisyphus on plays:

- “To the actor as to the absurd man, a premature death is irreparable.”
 - Caligula best matches the Actor archetype, especially in the performance as Venus.
 - “Men die and they are not happy” became both Caligula’s means and end; he exposed Romans to this phenomenon by subjecting them to it.
- “It is always easy to be logical. It is almost impossible to be logical to the bitter end. Men who die by their own hand consequently follow to its conclusion their emotional inclination...is there a logic to the point of death?”
 - Caligula draws every mention of logical sense to “its conclusion,” but his death is proxy-suicide; his “emotional inclination” was therefore superimposed on his sense of logic.

Caligula’s obsession with “logical conclusions,” combined with his eventual realization that “my freedom isn’t the right one,” shows Camus’s mistrust of logic over brotherhood and harmony.

Outcomes:

Upon analysis, Camus’s Absurds develop into a singular thesis of ethics based on an understanding of the aesthetic value of Nature over Artifice; these works rely on naturalistic metaphor to establish and communicate ethics in the face of the Absurd, which many take as negating Truth. Camus argues that “‘everything is permitted’ does not mean that nothing is forbidden.” He presents Nature as the guide for determining the designations.

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